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# The Hampton Roads Conference

**A REFUTATION of the Statement that  
Mr. Lincoln said if Union was written at  
the top the Southern Commissioners might  
fill in the balance.— By Julian S. Carr.**



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The True Story of the Hampton Roads Conference between Mr. Lincoln and Wm. H. Seward on one side and Alex. Stephens and other Confederate Commissioners on the other side.

A refutation of the statement that Mr. Lincoln told Alexander Stephens that if he were permitted to write Union at the top, the South might fill in the balance.

A demonstration that Mr. Stephens never made any such report.

*BY*

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## The Hampton Roads Conference.

It is common to hear that President Lincoln, at the Hampton Roads Conference, during the War between the States, said to Vice President Stephens something like this: "Let me write 'Union' at the top of a sheet of paper, and then you may write after it whatever you please."

The effect of the story as it is generally told is to make a good impression about President Lincoln and a bad impression about President Davis; the one big-souled and yielding, and the other blind and self-destructive.

The beginnings of the story seem to have been very early. The Conference was held on February 3, 1865, and on February 6th the Louisville *Democrat* contained this item:

"According to the 'Herald's' (New York) correspondent the President (Lincoln) is reported to have proposed to Messrs. Stephens, Hunter, and Campbell (Confederate Commissioners) that if they were prepared to promise the return of their States to the Union, he was ready to waive all minor questions but that of Chief Magistrate of the republic, sworn to maintain the Union and laws."

Then, in the Augusta (Ga.) *Chronicle and Sentinel* there appeared in the issue of June 7, 1865, what purported to be an interview with Vice President Stephens about the Hampton Roads Conference. (It will be shown later that Mr. Stephens repeatedly and even bitterly complained about the incorrectness and injustice of this article.)

Then, Judge John H. Reagan in his *Memoirs* (p. 177) mentions the names of four persons who averred that Mr. Stephens himself was the original author of the story, to-wit: The Hon. Henry Waterson of Kentucky, the Rev. E. A. Green of Virginia, Dr. R. J. Massey of Georgia, and Mr. Howell of Georgia. These persons are quoted as saying

that they heard Mr. Stephens himself expressly assert it.

In addition to these, Mr. Henry Watterson, in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* of June 20, 1916, avers that Mr. Stephens, on the night of his arrival in Richmond from Hampton Roads, told this story to "Mr. Felix G. DeFontaine, with whom he lodged and who, when the facts were disputed, made oath to the truth of them." In the same editorial, Mr. Watterson says Mr. Stephens said it to him personally.

So the authorship of this story about Union and the sheet of paper is charged to Mr. Alexander H. Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy and a member of the Hampton Roads Conference.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the available sources of information, and follow the data to such a conclusion as the records may warrant. In its preparation, the following have been examined, and are the basis of its conclusions:

*Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel*, June 7, 1865.

*Louisville Democrat*, Feb. 6, 1865.

*Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 2, 1916.

*Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 20, 1916.

Lincoln's *Message to House*, Feb. 10, 1865. *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. XLVI, p. 505.

Lincoln's *Instructions to Seward*, Jan. 31, 1865. *War of the Rebellion*, Ibid.

*Lincoln's Life*, by Nicolay and Hay, Vol. X.

Seward's *Letter to Adams*, *War of the Rebellion*, Series III, Vol. IV, pp. 1163-1164.

*Report of Confederate Commissioners*, Feb. 5, 1865. *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. XLVI, p. 446.

Davis' *Message to Congress*, Feb. 6, 1865. *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. XLVI, p. 446.



Davis' *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, Vol. II, pp. 611-620.

Stephens' *War Between the States*, Vol. II, Chap. XIII. Published 1870.

Stephens' *Pictorial History of the United States*.

Stephens' *Recollections*: Diary kept while a prisoner at Ft. Warren; 16 references to Hampton Roads Conference.

Stephens' *Letters and Speeches*, by Henry Cleveland, pp. 198-200. Published 1866.

*Stephens' Life*, by Pendleton, pp. 330-342. Published 1908.

Stephens' Five Articles in Controversy with B. H. Hill in *Atlanta Herald*, April 17, May 8, 25, 31, June 5, 1874.

Campbell's *Recollection*, *Southern Magazine*, Dec., 1874. P. 191.

Hunter's *Account*, *Southern Historical Society Papers*, Vol. III, p. 175. April, 1877.

Goode's *Account*, *The Forum*, Vol. XXIX, p. 92-103. March, 1900.

Hill's *Life, Letters and Speeches*, p. 399.

Hill's *Unwritten History of Hampton Roads Conference*, *Atlanta Herald*, May 3, 1874.

Reagan's *Memoirs*, Chap. XIII. Published 1906.

Gordon's *Reminiscences*.

Watterson's *Might-Have-Beens of History*, *Courier-Journal*, May 2 and June 20, 1916.

This conference was held February 3, 1865. Its object was to find, if possible, some terms of ending the Civil War between the Northern and Southern States.

It was brought about by Francis P. Blair, Sr., an influential journalist of Washington. He was a native of Abingdon, Virginia, had lived in Ken-

tucky, but was at this time a citizen of Maryland. He was a Democrat, and had been a personal friend of President Davis, but had supported Lincoln for President, and fellowshipped with the North during the war.

Blair thought peace might be brought about by getting the two Governments to suspend hostilities against each other, and join their forces in a common campaign against Maximilian and the French in Mexico, in an application of the Monroe Doctrine. He surmised that, by the time this task should be finished, and because it would have been jointly done, the animosities between the two sections would be so assuaged, North and South could settle their differences without further bloodshed.

He presented his idea first of all to President Lincoln, who gave him a passport to Richmond. There he laid his project before President Davis, in a private interview. Mr. Davis first satisfied himself that he was an informal, though unofficial, representative of President Lincoln; made a written memorandum of the interview; submitted the same to Blair for his approval of its correctness; and, on January 12, 1865, gave him a note, in which he said:

"I am willing now, as heretofore, to enter into negotiations for the restoration of peace."

Blair received this note, and took it to Washington, and showed it to President Lincoln. He then brought back to Richmond a note dated January 18, 1865, in which Mr. Lincoln said:

"I have constantly been, am now, and shall continue ready to receive any agent whom he, or any other influential person now resisting National authority, may informally send me, with a view of securing peace to the people of our common country."

The way was thus cleared for both Presidents to appoint conferees, and arrange for the meeting.

President Davis appointed three commissioners—Vice President Alexander H. Stephens, Senator Robert M. T. Hunter, and Assistant Secretary of War John A. Campbell.

He thus entrusted the mission to the gentlemen most likely to succeed. All three of them were known to the public as critics of Mr. Davis' administration of Confederate affairs. They persistently believed that the war could be settled by negotiation, if only a fair trial were made. They were at least in as good favour at Washington as any men who could be selected, particularly Mr. Stephens. He and Mr. Lincoln had been fellow-Whigs, and personal friends, and Mr. Lincoln had expressed a desire that he might have him as a member of his Cabinet. He had been opposed to secession from the beginning, and had all along been an aggressive advocate of peace by negotiation. The Northern papers of the day were diligently circulating the report that he was on the eve of severing his connection with the Richmond Government and the cause of the South. Mr. Hunter was a leading malcontent in the Confederate Senate, and Mr. Lincoln was known to entertain a very high regard for Judge Campbell. Mr. Davis, furthermore, knew that he himself was bitterly disliked at Washington, and this animosity toward him personally would likely handicap any negotiations for peace. He also well understood that, if the conference should fail, all the blame and censure would be heaped upon him. So he selected conferees who could most likely get favourable terms for the South.

He gave his commissioners the following instructions:

“Richmond, January 28, 1865.

“In conformity with the letter of Mr. Lincoln, of which the foregoing is a copy, you are to proceed to Washington

City for an informal conference with him upon the issues involved in the existing war, and for the purpose of securing peace to the two countries.

"With great respect, your obedient servant,

"JEFFERSON DAVIS."

He thus left his commissioners untrammelled. The conference they were to go to was to be "informal." The matters they were to confer about were "the issues involved in the existing war." The object which they were to seek was "peace to the two countries." There were no supplementary oral instructions which "tied their hands." Their powers were unqualified, except by the terms of the President's written note. There were "two countries" at the moment this note was given, but he did not bind the commissioners to make such a settlement as would leave "two countries" in existence after the conference. The clause about the "two countries" was merely descriptive of the *status quo* at the beginning of the conference.

President Lincoln appointed as his representative his Secretary of State, William H. Seward, known by every one to be unusually astute, if not foxy, and bitterly hostile to the South. He gave him the following instructions, specifically defining what he was to require as "indispensable:"

"Executive Mansion, Jan. 31, 1865.

"Hon. William H. Seward, Secretary of War:

"You will proceed to Fortress Monroe, Va., there to meet and informally confer with Messrs. Stephens, Hunter, and Campbell, on the basis of my letter to F. P. Blair, Esq., of Jan. 18, 1865, a copy of which you have. You will make known to them that three things are indispensable, to-wit: 1st, the restoration of the national authority throughout all the States; 2nd, no receding by the Executive of the United States on the slavery question from the position assumed thereon in the late Annual Message to Congress, and in the preceding documents; 3rd, no cessation of hostilities short of an end of the war and the disbanding of all the forces hostile

to the Government. You will inform them that all propositions of theirs not inconsistent with the above will be considered and passed upon in a spirit of sincere liberality. You will hear all that they may choose to say and report to me. You will not assume to definitely consummate anything.

"Yours, etc.,

ABRAHAM LINCOLN."

Mr. Seward was thus instructed by his President to require three things as "indispensable" preliminaries to any subsequent terms: (1) submission, (2) emancipation, (3) disbandment of the Southern armies. Nothing was to be entertained "inconsistent" with these demands.

After many difficulties and much dispatching, the conference was held, not at Washington, but at Hampton Roads on February 3, 1865. When the Confederate commissioners reached the place of meeting, they found that President Lincoln himself had joined Mr. Seward.

The conference was held in the saloon of the *River Queen*, a small steamer, anchored out in the stream for the sake of greater privacy. The meeting lasted for four hours. It was held behind closed doors. Messrs. Lincoln, Seward, Stephens, Hunter and Campbell were all present throughout the entire time. Besides these five, no other person entered the room, except that once a negro servant came in, and was promptly sent out. At the outset, the wily Seward proposed that there be no secretary and nothing like minutes. So no written memorandum of anything said or done was made at the time.

What, then, did transpire at this conference? What terms of peace were offered to the Confederate commissioners?

It would seem to be easy to answer this question, because every member of the conference—the only ones who could possibly know—has written and printed and given to the public, each his own ac-

count of what did occur. *And every one of these accounts agree.* There is no variation as to the substantive terms that were there proposed.

And yet there has been much discussion, down to the present day, as to what was precisely proposed to the South at that conference. Some contend that the only terms offered were "unconditional submission." Others contend that President Lincoln said to Mr. Stephens, the chairman of the Confederate representatives, words to this effect, "Stephens, let me write Union and you can write after it what you please." And so the great-hearted and generous-minded Lincoln offered them reconciliation and peace on their own terms!

Now let us carefully examine all the available sources of information on this subject, and accept the conclusion to which they lead.

### **President Lincoln's Account.**

The contemporary newspapers of the day filled all the public mind with conjectural reports of what had taken place at Hampton Roads. For example, the Louisville *Democrat*, in its issue of February 6, 1865, contained this item:

"According to the 'Herald's' correspondent the President is reported to have proposed to Messrs. Stephens, Hunter, and Campbell that if they were prepared to promise the return of their States to the Union he was ready to waive all minor questions but that of Chief Magistrate of the republic, sworn to maintain the Union and laws."

Then the *Herald*, under the same date, gives another current report to the effect that "no concession or promise was made by him (Lincoln) in the least degree yielding."

These conflicting newspaper stories lead the Federal House of Representatives, on February the 8th, to pass a resolution requesting President Lin-

coln himself to give a true account of what did happen at Hampton Roads.

He complied with this request, and on February the 10th sent an official Message to the House, purporting to give a correct account of the matter. In this Message he first quotes all the letters and telegrams and communications leading up to the conference, and then concludes with these words :

“On the morning of the 3rd, the gentlemen, Messrs. Stephens, Hunter, and Campbell, came aboard our steamer and had an interview with the Secretary of State and myself of several hours’ duration. No question of preliminaries to the meeting was then and there made or mentioned. No other person was present. No papers were exchanged or produced, and it was in advance agreed that the conversation was to be informal and verbal merely. On my part the whole substance of the instructions to the Secretary of State, heretofore recited, was stated and insisted upon, and nothing was said inconsistent therewith. \* \* \* The Conference ended without result. The foregoing, containing, as is believed, all the information sought, is respectfully submitted.” —“War of the Rebellion,” Series I, Vol. XLVI, pp. 505-513.

Mr. Lincoln being the reporter, what did he offer at Hampton Roads? He says, “On my part \* \* \* nothing was said inconsistent” with his instructions to Secretary Seward, and he had instructed Seward to demand three things: (1) submission to National authority, (2) emancipation of the negroes, (3) disbandment of Confederate armies. But, if he said, as is alleged, “Let me write Union, and you can write what you please,” he said something seriously “inconsistent” with his instructions to Secretary Seward, and his message was not honest and truthful. It is unbelievable that Mr. Lincoln did thus misrepresent the facts to the House. What he himself substantively says he demanded at Hampton Roads was equal to “unconditional submission.”

### **Secretary Seward's Account.**

This is found in a letter to Charles Francis Adams, United States Minister to London. This letter was dated February 7, 1865, four days after the conference, and is printed in the *War of the Rebellion*, Series III, Vol. IV, pp. 1163-1164. In it Mr. Seward says:

"The President announced that we can agree to no cessation, or suspension of hostilities, except on the basis of the disbandment of the insurgent forces and the restoration of national authority throughout all the States in the Union. Collaterally, \* \* \* the President announced that he must not be expected to depart from the positions he had heretofore assumed in his proclamation of emancipation \* \* \* It was further declared by the President that the complete restoration of the national authority everywhere was an indispensable condition of any assent on our part to whatever form of peace might be proposed.'"

This is not the entire letter, but there is nothing in it which can possibly be construed as inconsistent with what is quoted. Mr. Seward here asserts that the President announced as "indispensable" pre-conditions, (1) "the disbandment of the insurgent forces," (2) the maintenance of "his proclamation of emancipation," and (3) "the complete restoration of the national authority." All of this means "unconditional submission," and is absolutely inconsistent with anything even approximating, "You can have Union on your own terms."

### **Report of the Confederate Commissioners.**

On their return from the Hampton Roads Conference, the three Confederate Commissioners made a unanimous report of what took place at the meeting. As you read it, as copied below, notice whether there is anything in it that even sounds like Lincoln saying, "Stephens, let me write Union, and you can write what you please."



"Richmond, Va., February 5, 1865.

"To the President of the Confederate States:

"Sir:—Under your letter of appointment of the 28th ult., we proceeded to seek an 'informal conference' with Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, upon the subject mentioned in the letter. The conference was granted, and took place on the 30th inst. (clearly the date was February 3d), on board of a steamer in Hampton Roads, where we met President Lincoln and the Hon. Mr. Seward, Secretary of the State of the United States. It continued for several hours, and was both full and explicit.

"We learned from them that the Message of President Lincoln to the Congress of the United States, in December last, explains clearly and distinctly his sentiments as to the terms, conditions, and method of proceeding, by which peace can be secured to the people, and we were not informed that they would be modified or altered to obtain that end. We understand from him that no terms or proposals of any treaty, or agreement, looking to an ultimate settlement, would be entertained or made by him with the Confederate States, because that would be a recognition of their existence as a separate Power, which, under no circumstances, would be done; and for this reason that no such terms would be entertained by him from the States separately; that no extended truce or armistice (as at present advised) would be granted, without a satisfactory assurance in advance of a complete restoration of the authority of the United States over all places within the States of the Confederacy.

"That whatever consequences may follow from the re-establishment of that authority must be accepted; but that individuals, subject to pains and penalties under the laws of the United States, might rely upon a very liberal use of the power confided to him to remit those pains and penalties if peace be restored.

"During the Conference the proposed Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, adopted by Congress on the 31st ult., was brought to our notice. This Amendment declares that neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except for crimes, should exist within the United States, or any place within their jurisdiction, and that Congress should have power to enforce this Amendment by appropriate legislation. Of all the correspondence that preceded the conference herein

mentioned, and leading to the same, you have heretofore been informed.

“Very respectfully, your obedient servants,  
“ALEX. H. STEPHENS,  
“ROBERT M. T. HUNTER,  
“JOHN A. CAMPBELL.”

*War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. XLVI, p. 446.  
*Stephens' War Between the States*, Vol. II, p. 792.

These three signers were competent to tell what transpired at the Hampton Roads Conference, because they were there from its beginning to its end, and participated in all its deliberations. Their summing-up of the matter was deliberate, and submitted as their official account of what took place. They had every reason to believe that whatever they said would affect the conduct of the President of the Confederacy, of his Congress, of his Military Department, and react upon the public sentiment of the Southern people. We must believe that their report was serious, and that they intended to put Mr. Davis into possession of the exact state of Mr. Lincoln's mind as to the ending of the hostilities between the two sections. We cannot imagine that they were trifling, or suppressive, or duplicitous. We must hold such gentlemen, under such circumstances, to have been sincere and honest and fully conscious in this account. Any other view is a grave aspersion upon them.

They formally and officially informed Mr. Davis that Mr. Lincoln would entertain no “terms,” or “conditions,” or “methods of proceeding,” or “proposals,” or “agreement,” or “truce,” or “armistice,” “without a satisfactory assurance in advance of a complete restoration of the authority of the United States over all places within the States of the Confederacy.” This can mean nothing else, under the

circumstances, but that the Confederate Government must first surrender, before Mr. Lincoln would consider Blair's project of applying the Monroe Doctrine to Maximilian and Mexico, or anything else. Their report assured Mr. Davis that Mr. Lincoln was implacable, and determined to drive the war, without any interruption whatsoever, to utter subjugation. This would not have been true, had Mr. Lincoln at any time, or in any manner, said, in words or in substance, "Give me Union on your own terms."

Moreover, the three Southern members of this conference were critics and opponents of Mr. Davis' administration. Mr. Stephens was the ring-leader of the malcontents and obstructionists at Richmond, and soon after this conference left the Confederate Capitol, and went to his home in Georgia, to nurse his dissatisfaction and disgust with Mr. Davis' conduct of affairs. He and Hunter and Campbell and their like-minded associates were in favour of trying to settle the controversy by some diplomatic compromise, while Mr. Davis felt, consistently and persistently persuaded that it would have to be fought to a finish. If, therefore, Mr. Lincoln had said at Hampton Roads, "Let me write Union, and you can write anything else you want," it is inconceivable that these gentlemen, struggling as they had been for some compromise, would not have promptly and avariciously seized upon it, committed the country to it there and then, rushed back to Richmond, proclaimed it, capitalized it, and set to work to put it through.

But they did not pursue this course. They came back with the lugubrious report that they found Mr. Lincoln implacable, and that he would consider nothing but the complete surrender of the Southern States.

### Report of President Davis.

The Confederate Commissioners not only made their written report of the Conference to President Davis, but Mr. Stephens says, "We reported to him, verbally, all that had occurred at the Conference, and much more minutely in detail than I have given you." We may assume that Mr. Davis had full and free interviews with his commissioners, after their return to Richmond, and that they put him in possession of the minutest inside details of all that was said and done at the meeting. Mr. Stephens says that they withheld nothing, and it is unthinkable that such honorable gentlemen would have kept back one iota of important information. Did they tell Mr. Davis that Mr. Lincoln had said that the Confederate Government could have Union *on its own terms*?

If they did, Mr. Davis deliberately falsified to the House of Representatives, for on February 6th he sent to that body a formal message in which he said, "the enemy refused \* \* \* to permit us to have peace on any other basis than our unconditional submission to their rule." *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. XLVI, p. 446; Stephens' *War Between the States*, Vol. II, pp. 621, 792, 623. To sustain this interpretation, he laid before the body the written report of the three Confederate commissioners, in which Messrs. Stephens and Hunter and Campbell said, "We understand from him (Lincoln) that no terms or proposals of any treaty, or agreement, looking to an ultimate settlement, would be entertained or made by him with the Confederate States." Messrs. Davis and Stephens and Hunter and Campbell are equally guilty of the grossest misrepresentation and shameful dishonesty, if they knew that Mr. Lincoln had said that they could have Union *on their own terms*.

Having sent this account to the House of Representatives, Mr. Davis straightway called for a mass meeting of citizens in the African Church (the largest building in Richmond), and made, what Mr. Stephens called, the most Demosthenian speech since the days of Demosthenes, in which he told his hearers that the Hampton Roads Conference had demonstrated the diplomatic hopelessness of their cause, and called upon the country to make a last desperate military effort. Mr. Stephens himself gave up in despair, and went to his home in Crawfordsville, Georgia. This is all incredible, upon the supposition that Mr. Lincoln had said to all the commissioners, or to any one of them, at Hampton Roads, "You can have Union on your own terms."

Did Messrs. Stephens, Hunter and Campbell consciously misrepresent Mr. Lincoln, and impose upon Mr. Davis? They were honorable gentlemen. Did Mr. Davis misrepresent Messrs. Stephens and Hunter and Campbell, and impose first upon the Confederate House of Representatives, and then upon the public? The thing is unbelievable.

When Mr. Davis sent to the Confederate Congress the report of the Hampton Roads commissioners, the Senate and the House passed joint resolutions. The preamble recited the previous efforts which the Government had made to get peace by negotiations, and then said concerning the Hampton Roads effort:

"They (the commissioners), 'after a full conference with President Lincoln and Secretary Seward, have reported that they were informed explicitly that the authorities of the United States would hold no negotiations with the Confederate States, or any of them separately; that no terms, except such as the conqueror grants to the subjugated, would be extended to the people of these States; and that the subversion of our institutions, and a complete submission to their rule, was the only condition of peace.'"

Then the Congress passed the resolutions, accepting the issue, calling upon the army and the people to redouble their efforts, and invoking the help of Almighty God. Mr. Stephens was President of the Senate and Mr. Hunter was a member of it; and we are seriously asked to believe that they sat there and heard this false interpretation of Mr. Lincoln and the conference, and saw this desperate action of their Congress, without opening their mouths to inform those bodies that they could have Union on their own terms. One cannot believe that Mr. Stephens was so guilty.

In reviewing this whole Hampton Roads affair in 1881 when he was writing his great *History*, Mr. Davis says:

"I think the views of Mr. Lincoln had changed after he wrote the letter to Mr. Blair of June 18th, and the change was mainly produced by the report of what he saw and heard at Richmond on the night he (Blair) staid there."—"Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government," Vol. II., p. 618.

It is perfectly certain that Mr. Lincoln had some terms in his mind when he first sent Blair to Mr. Davis. They were probably concessory in their nature. The report somehow got out that he might be in a yielding frame of mind when he should meet the commissioners from the South. Hence the newspapers of the North were circulating it, and when the conference was over, the House of Representatives called upon him to report exactly what had been done. Mr. Davis thinks that what he learned from Mr. Blair about the desperate condition of the Confederacy caused him to change his mind. It is also likely that, in the interim while the conference was being arranged for, he also felt the spirit and temper of those about him who were implacable towards the South. At any rate, Mr. Davis says that the President of the United States

declared at the conference that he would accept nothing but "unconditional surrender." We may fairly suppose that, after the lapse of so many years, when writing about it with the war all over, he would have said something about Mr. Lincoln's generous attitude at Hampton Roads, if he had ever been told by any of the commissioners that the President of the United States had said to any one of them that the Confederacy could have Union on its own terms.

### **The Story of Alexander H. Stephens.**

At the time, and later, a great many divergent reports were spread abroad as to what did actually occur at the Hampton Roads Conference. Mr. Stephens, one of the principal actors in it (and because of these variant reports) devotes the whole of his twenty-third chapter in the second volume of his history of the *War Between the States* (published in 1870), to the Hampton Roads Conference. He undertook to give the substance of what each member of the conference said, with considerable detail, and in the order of each speaker. His chief object was to make public the internal facts of the meeting, and clear all misunderstandings and misrepresentations. At the close of his narrative, he wrote, "This is as full and accurate an account as I can now give of the origin, the objects, and the conduct of this Conference, from its beginning to its end" (p. 619). The following is a fair summary of his long account:

STEPHENS—Well, Mr. President, is there no way of putting an end to the present trouble (p. 599) ?

LINCOLN—There is but one way—those who are resisting the laws of the Union must cease their resistance (p. 600).

CAMPBELL—How can a restoration to the

Union take place, assuming that the Confederate States desire it (p. 609) ?

LINCOLN—By disbanding their armies, and permitting the national authorities to resume their functions (p. 609).

HUNTER—Then there can be no agreement, no treaty, no stipulation—nothing but unconditional surrender (p. 616) ?

SEWARD—No words like “unconditional surrender” have been used (p. 616).

HUNTER—But you decline to make any agreement with us, and that is tantamount to “unconditional surrender” (p. 617).

LINCOLN—The Executive would exercise the powers of his office with great liberality (p. 617).

STEPHENS—Mr. President, I hope you will reconsider (p. 618).

LINCOLN—Well, Stephens, I will reconsider, but I do not think I will change my mind (p. 618).

Boil down this long narrative of Mr. Stephens to a single terse phrase, and put that phrase in the mouth of Mr. Lincoln at the conference, and it is not “Union, on your terms,” but it is “Union, on terms of the complete surrender of the South.”

Stephens: *War Between the States*, Vol. III, pp. 576-624.

A publication appeared in the *Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle and Sentinel* on June 7, 1865, purporting to give Mr. Stephens’ version of the Hampton Roads Conference. It was republished in many other papers. Mr. Stephens in his *Recollections*, a diary which he kept while a prisoner in Fort Warren, makes sixteen entries concerning the Hampton Roads Conference, several of them bewailing this newspaper article. He describes it as “a discordant



jumble of facts which presents almost anything but the truth" (p. 264).

His early biographer, Henry Cleveland, who wrote in 1866, while Mr. Stephens was still alive and accessible, says:

"He (Mr. Stephens) has often been heard to say that his views in consenting to take part in that conference, can never be fully understood without a knowledge of the true objects contemplated by the authors of the mission. These he has never disclosed, and does not yet feel himself at liberty to disclose. \* \* \* The report (of the commissioners) contains the exact truth touching the points embraced in it; but the real object of that mission was not embraced in it. This was verbally and confidentially communicated."—"Letters and Speeches," pp. 198, 199.

This biographer says that "he (Mr. Stephens) has, on several occasions, told a few particular friends, some things that transpired." Then he adds, "particularly the agreeableness of the interview, the courteous bearing of Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Seward; but he has always objected to giving the public any account whatever beyond that contained in the official report of the commissioners."

Finally, in 1870, Mr. Stephens told his whole story of the conference in his *History*—and failed to put in it anything like the story of the sheet of paper and Union on any terms.

### **Judge Campbell's Account.**

This is to be found in the *Southern Magazine* for December, 1874, p. 191. This careful, judicious and judicial gentleman says:

"In conclusion, Mr. Hunter summed up what seemed to be the result of the interview: that there could be no agreements by treaty between the Confederate States and the United States, or any agreements between them; that there was nothing left for them but unconditional submission."

According to this member of the commission they got nothing at Hampton Roads, when all the four hours' conversation was boiled down to its essence, but a proposition of "unconditional submission." This, however, would not be true, if Mr. Lincoln said anything approximating, "Let me write Union, and you can write after it what you please."

### Senator Hunter's Account.

Both Mr. Stephens in his *History* and Judge Campbell in his *Recollections* represent Senator Hunter as summing-up and reducing to a nut-shell the sum and substance of all that had been proposed in the four-hour conference. Consequently great weight ought to be attached to his account of the meeting. It is to be found in the "Southern Historical Society Papers," Vol. III, pp. 168-176. It was written in April, 1877.

Mr. Hunter opens his narrative with some account of the occasion and origin of the conference. Then he says that Mr. Stephens seemed "possessed with the idea that secession was the true remedy for sectional difference," but neither Mr. Lincoln nor Mr. Seward "countenanced the idea for a moment." Then Mr. Stephens "revived the old Monroe Doctrine, and suggested that a reunion might be formed on the basis of uniting to drive the French out of America," but Mr. Hunter says, "this was received with even less favour than I expected." Continuing he says, "Their (Lincoln and Seward) whole object seemed to be to force reunion and an abolition of slavery." Then an "armistice" was proposed and talked about, but it "was promptly opposed by the President and Secretary of State." Then he says, "I asked him (Lincoln) to communicate the terms, if any, upon which he would negoti-

ate with us. He said he could not treat with us with arms in our hands; in rebellion, as it were, against the Government." Mr. Hunter concludes his story:

"They (Lincoln and Seward) would hint at nothing but unconditional submission, although professing to disclaim any such demand. Reunion and submission seemed their sole conditions. Upon the subject of the forfeiture of lands \* \* \* I said that nothing was left us but absolute submission both as to rights and property. \* \* \* Mr. Seward, it is true, disclaimed all demands for unconditional submission. But what else was the demand for reunion and abolition of slavery, without any compensation for the negroes or even absolute safety for property proclaimed to have been forfeited?"

According to this story, at the Hampton Roads conference the members talked first about "secession," and made no progress towards getting together on that theory. Then they talked about Blair's proposition, the Monroe Doctrine, and Mexico, and still made no progress. Then they conferred about an "armistice," and got nowhere. Then Mr. Hunter asked Mr. Lincoln on what terms they could have *reunion*, and he would "hint at nothing but unconditional submission." Then he inquired what safeguards they could expect for their slaves and their property, and he referred them to his mercy. Mr. Hunter says—and he was there—"that nothing was left us but absolute submission both as to rights and property." And yet there are some—who were not there—who ask us to believe that Mr. Lincoln said something like, "You can have Union, on your own terms!"

Mr. Hunter says it was "reunion" that they were talking about, and what the Confederates wanted to know was the terms. Mr. Lincoln "would hint at nothing but unconditional submission."

That certainly is not the same thing as saying, "Let me write Union, and you can write what you please after it."

### **Congressman Goode's Account.**

Mr. John Goode was a Virginia member of the Confederate Congress in 1865, when the Hampton Roads Conference was held. In the March *Forum* of 1900, Vol. XXIX, pp. 92-103, he has published his version of this conference. It has an evidential value, because it is based upon a conversation which he had with one of the Confederate commissioners in Richmond soon after his return from Hampton Roads. His story agrees with all the other published accounts. The terms, according to his informant, were "unconditional submission." There is nothing in it which approaches—"Union, and then what you please."

### **Judge Reagan's Account.**

On the formation of the Provisional Government of the Confederate States at Montgomery, Alabama, Mr. John H. Reagan of Texas was made Postmaster General in the Cabinet of Mr. Davis, and continued in this office to the end of the war. Always in the confidence of his chief, and loyal to him throughout the whole conflict, he was taken prisoner with him at the wind-up of it all.

He published his "*Memoirs*" in 1906. He had all the controversies and allegations about the Hampton Roads Conference before him, and devoted the thirteenth chapter of his book to the subject. He says:

"During recent years there has been an extensive discussion through the public prints of the questions which rose at the Hampton Roads Conference. It has been asserted over and over that President Lincoln offered to pay \$400,000,000 for the slaves of the South to secure an end of the war; and

that he held up a piece of paper to Mr. Stephens, saying: 'Let me write the word Union on it, and you may add any other conditions you please, if it will give us peace.' I am probably not using the exact words which were employed, but I am expressing the idea given to the public, in the discussion. It has frequently been alleged that Mr. Stephens said these offers were made. This has been repeated by citizens of acknowledged ability and high character, and it has been said that these offers could not be acceded to because the instructions given to the Commission by President Davis prevented it \* \* \* I shall submit evidence that no such propositions were ever made."

The "evidence" which Judge Reagan presents is the joint report of the Confederate Commissioners to Mr. Davis; the message of Mr. Davis to his Congress based upon that report; the resolutions of the Confederate Congress predicated upon the reports made to them; Mr. Lincoln's message to the Federal House, on the subject; and Secretary Seward's letter to Mr. Adams, the American minister to Great Britain. Then he says:

"While it is true that some respectable men have asserted that Mr. Stephens told them of Mr. Lincoln's alleged offer,\* \* \* and I have all their statements in writing or print, \* \* \* there must have been some misunderstanding as to his language, for he was an honorable and truthful man, and a man of too much good sense to have made such allegations in the face of such record as is here presented."

Then Judge Reagan names the following persons as those who have said that Mr. Stephens made the assertions about the piece of paper and Union, and about the \$400,000,000 for the slaves: Hon. Henry Watterson of Kentucky, Rev. E. A. Green of Virginia, Dr. R. J. Massey of Georgia, and Mr. Howell of Georgia.

Over against these four, he sets the following eight gentlemen who allege that Mr. Stephens denied to them that he ever made such statements: Rev. F. C. Boykin of Georgia, Mr. R. F. Littig of Mis-

Mississippi, Hon. James Orr of South Carolina, Hon. Frank B. Sexton, Col. Stephen W. Blount of Texas, Mr. Charles G. Newman of Arkansas, Gov. A. H. Garland of Arkansas and Senator Vest of Missouri.

Inasmuch as four reputable gentlemen affirm, and eight reputable gentlemen deny, Judge Reagan disposes of the matter by saying that "there must have been some misunderstanding as to the language" which Mr. Stephens did use.

### **Col. Henry Watterson's Account.**

Col. Watterson is the editor of the Louisville *Courier-Journal* and the most brilliant journalist on the American continent. He has recently told the story of the Hampton Roads affair in his newspaper. In an editorial of May 2, 1916, under the caption, "The Might-Have-Beens of History," he says:

"There had been many epistolary and verbal exchanges between the two Capitals, Washington and Richmond, before this fateful conference had come to pass. The parties to it were personally well known to each other. Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Stephens were indeed old friends. The proceedings were informal and without ceremony. At the outset it was agreed that no writing or memorandum should be made of what might be said or done. It is known, however, that at a certain point, the President of the United States and the Vice President of the Southern Confederacy, sitting a little apart from the rest, Mr. Lincoln took up a sheet of paper and said by way of completing the unreserved conversation that had passed between them, 'Stephens, let me write Union at the top of this page and you may write below it whatever you please.' He had already committed himself, in the event that the Southern armies laid down their arms and the Southern States returned to the Union, to the payment of \$400,000,000 for the slaves. That such an opportunity for the South, then on the verge of collapse, to end the war should have been refused will remain forever a mystery bordering on the supernatural."

He then characterizes President Lincoln as "the Christ-man who had thrown out a life-line," won-

ders if it all were due to "the hand of God," moralizes about Napoleon, and prophesies direfully for the German Kaiser. He then introduces this paragraph:

"It will be recalled that Mr. Jefferson Davis was wont to dwell upon the reluctance with which he quitted the Union, and joined in establishing the Confederacy. Yet, at the supreme moment, he could not see his way clear to an advantageous peace by honorable agreement. He let the golden moment pass and went, taking with him the cause he had maintained during four years so valiantly, to precipitate and complete extinction."

Mr. Davis was not in the conference. We have seen the report, which the commissioners brought back to him, informed him "that no terms or proposals of any treaty or agreement looking to an ultimate settlement would be entertained or made by him with the authorities of the Confederate States." If the commissioners told him the truth, that he could get "no terms," how did Mr. Davis "let the golden moment pass?" If Mr. Lincoln said to Mr. Stephens, "Let me write Union, and you can write what you please," and Mr. Stephens withheld this information until after the war was over, it would seem that it was he who "let the golden moment pass." Mr. Watterson writes like one obsessed with admiration for Mr. Lincoln, "the Christ-man," and biased against Mr. Davis, the President of the Confederacy.

When his editorial of May the 2nd was characterized as "fiction" by the *Oklahoma City Times* and the *Macon Telegraph*, Mr. Watterson replied in an editorial of June 20th in the *Courier-Journal*, in which he said:

"That Mr. Lincoln said on the occasion of the Hampton Roads Conference, what is denied as 'fiction,' rests upon the statement of Mr. Stephens himself, made to many persons of the highest credibility. It admits of no doubt whatever. It does not appear in the official documents, because it was

not a part of the formal proceedings, but an aside during an interview between Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Stephens. They were warm personal friends—old Whig colleagues—Lincoln an ardent admirer of Stephens, whom he wanted to ask to become a member of his Cabinet when he was elected President. The two had drawn apart from the rest. ‘Stephens,’ said Lincoln, as Mr. Stephens reported the conversation to many of his friends, ‘you know I am a fair man and I know you to be one. Let me write Union at the top of this page, and you may write below it whatever else you please. I am sure you will write nothing I cannot agree to.’ Mr. Stephens replied that the commissioners were limited to treating upon the basis of the recognition of the independence of the Confederacy alone. ‘Then, Stephens,’ said Lincoln sadly, ‘my hands are clean of every drop of blood spilled from this time onward.’ ”

Mr. Watterson says this story “does not appear in the official documents,” and the reason is “because it was no part of the formal proceedings.” He has told us that “no writing or memorandum was made,” and so there could have been no “official documents” prepared by the conference. He has told us that “the proceedings were informal and without ceremony,” and yet he says this story does not “appear” because it is “no part of the formal proceedings.” He says it was “an aside,” made as a kind of private remark, while Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Stephens were sitting apart from the rest. Continuing in his editorial of June 20th, he says:

“Mr. Davis did not see Mr. Stephens at all. But all that Mr. Watterson has averred in this regard was told the night of his arrival in Richmond by Mr. Stephens to Mr. Felix G. DeFontaine, with whom he lodged and who, when the facts were disputed, made oath to the truth of them, as did also Dr. Greer, Mr. Stephens’ pastor, and Gen. John B. Gordon and Evan P. Howell, of Atlanta, to whom later along, Mr. Stephens likewise related them, as indeed he had done to Mr. Watterson himself.”

Here Mr. Watterson says “Mr. Davis did not see Mr. Stephens at all”—presumably after his return from Hampton Roads. But Mr. Stephens says in



his long narrative in his *History*, "We reported to him (Davis), verbally, all that had occurred at the Conference. \* \* \* In this report to him, I gave it as my opinion. \* \* \* I called Mr. Davis' attention specially to the fact. \* \* \* I gave it to him as my opinion that there should be no written report by the Commissioners touching the Conference. \* \* \* I again yielded my views on that point." Mr. Davis did not deal with Mr. Blair in the beginning of this business without making a written memorandum of what was said, and submitted it to Mr. Blair. He saw the blunder of the commissioners in making no written memorandum of what was said at Hampton Roads. He wisely required that the report to him should be in black and white, so that he could be protected against misrepresentation in the matter. If Mr. Stephens may be believed—and he may be—he did see Mr. Davis after he returned from Hampton Roads, and had every opportunity of telling him that Mr. Lincoln had said, "Stephens, let me write 'Union' at the top of this page and you may write below it whatever you please." If Mr. Lincoln said it, why did not Mr. Stephens tell his President, the Confederate Congress, and all the South, and change all the results?

Did Mr. Lincoln say it? Did Mr. Stephens say he said it? Here are two questions. Let us take them up separately and see if we are not shut up to Judge Reagan's conclusion that there is a "misunderstanding" somewhere.

(1). If Mr. Lincoln said it, his Message of February 10th was not frank and disingenuous. It suppressed a vital fact. At that time the newspapers had filled the atmosphere with disturbing reports, some giving it out that the President of the

United States had been yielding, and others that he had been uncompromising. Besides, there were two groups at Washington, vexing Mr. Lincoln, the one urging that terms be made with the South, and the other implacable in its attitude and urgings. Here was a context, which caused the House of Representatives to ask him for the truth about the matter. He replied, saying he believed his Message contained "all the information sought." That Message—if our alleged story was fact—ought to have said, in substance, "I offered them Union on their own terms, and they declined my offer." But his Message did not say that. It said, "I offered them the terms I had previously laid down to Secretary Seward, namely, (1) submission, (2) emancipation, (3) disbandment of their armies, and then such mercy as the President of the United States might be pleased to show them." If he thus kept back material fact, while professing to give "all the information sought," his admirers must think him something else than "the Christ-man." Had he made such an offer and had it refused, it is unbelievable that he would not have told the country, and extinguished the peace-troublers who were tormenting him. Nicolay and Hay, his heroizing biographers, do not put this story into his mouth. Why did they not tell it, to illustrate his kindliness and chivalry to his foe? Moreover, why should he have made such a proposition? His game was as good as in his bag, and he knew it. Appomattox was on the 7th of April, and this conference was on the 3rd of February preceding.

(2). If Mr. Lincoln said it, why did not Messrs. Stephens, Hunter and Campbell seize upon it, even with avariciousness, and hurry back to Richmond with it, give it out to the President of the Confed-

eracy and to the Southern Congress? They were the leaders of the party at Richmond who desired and believed that peace could be had by negotiation. They had been sent by their Chief Magistrate to the meeting to get the best terms they could, and the terms—according to this story—were, “Union on your own terms.” Yet we are asked to believe that they came back and told Mr. Davis and the country that they found Mr. Lincoln implacable—no “terms,” “conditions,” “proposals,” “agreements,” “truce,” or “armistice,” except they “submitted” and threw themselves upon the mercy of the President of the United States. Did they misinform their Chief? Did Messrs. Stephens and Hunter sit in Congress the next day, and see that body pass resolutions, frantically calling upon the country to exert itself to the last extremity, because no terms could be had, when they privately knew that they could have “Union on their own terms”? What right had they to keep back the very heart and substance of what had been proposed at the conference? They were honorable gentlemen. Besides, they were critics of Mr. Davis. Why did they not use the information—if they had it—to triumph over Mr. Davis, save “the golden moment” and the country from “precipitate and complete extinction”? For the sake of a hearsay story, lionizing Mr. Lincoln, are we to blast the good name of the three Confederate Commissioners?

(3). If Mr. Lincoln said it only as an “aside” to Mr. Stephens for his private benefit, how was it done? They were all together, during the entire time, in the cabin of a small steamer. Why should Mr. Lincoln have whispered it to Mr. Stephens so that the others could not hear him? What motive could he have had, in such a conference, for whisper-

ing in the ear of Mr. Stephens, "any terms you want," and then saying out loud to Messrs. Hunter and Campbell, "no terms whatever"? Why should Mr. Stephens receive such an "aside," and keep it from his fellow-commissioners? Why did he not get Mr. Lincoln to say it out loud? Why should he keep such a secret from his associates? Carrying such a secret in his bosom, why did he not say to Mr. Davis, "Don't send that Message—I have 'aside' information, and will seek release from privacy"? Why did he not say to the Congress, "Don't pass those frantic resolutions—I have knowledge up my sleeve"? Secret? Private? Why, Mr. Watterson says he told it to Mr. DeFontaine and Dr. Greer, the first night he got to Richmond! Why could he not have told Mr. Hunter and Mr. Campbell on the way? If he did, his fellow-commissioners were not ignorant of it when they reported to Mr. Davis.

(4). If Mr. Lincoln said it to Mr. Stephens as an "aside," and then put him under the bonds of secrecy, why did he not *write* it down, after the war was over, and all obligations of secrecy had been removed by the death of Mr. Lincoln and the collapse of the Confederacy? He frequently wrote about the Hampton Roads Conference, with the avowed purpose of telling its whole inside history. Why did he not set down this story in something that he wrote? The public was confused about it. Some were saying that it was true, and some were saying that it was false. He himself became involved in a controversy with Senator B. H. Hill about it. Why did he not put it in black and white? He was a bitter critic of Mr. Davis. In all his voluminous writing about the war, after it was all over, he ceaselessly put the blame for the failure upon the Administration. Upon the supposition that

it was fact, can we imagine that he would not have somewhere written it down, and upon it made a telling point against the Administration? But none can point to the story as put down by his own pen, and above his own signature. The best they can do is to try to interpret his written words in such a way as to make them seem to support the story.

(5). But they say that Mr. Stephens verbally told this story "to many friends." If eight men, good and true, aver that they heard Mr. Stephens tell this story, eight other men, just as good and just as true, aver that they heard Mr. Stephens say that he did not tell it. If the first eight write or print their assertion, the second eight write or print their assertion.

What conclusion shall we reach and rest in? Mr. Stephens was a Christian gentleman of the highest piety, a statesman of the highest honor, a patriot of the purest loyalty. All the records and all the circumstances are inconsistent with the story that he ever said anything like what is imputed to him. He could not have been malignant and vengeful, nor yet stupid, enough to have withheld from Mr. Davis, his fellow-commissioners, the Confederate Congress, and the country at large, information, which, being known, might have saved "the cause" which Mr. Davis had maintained so "valiantly" for four years from "precipitate and complete extinction."

Judge Reagan's conclusion is the only reasonable and fair one, namely, that there must have been some "misunderstanding" of Mr. Stephens' words, when he was speaking freely and conversationally with his friends about the Hampton Roads Conference.

In a recent issue the *New York Times* gave the following account of the Hampton Roads Conference:

"At Hampton Roads, he (Lincoln) refused to accept any proposal except unconditional surrender. He promised 'clemency,' but refused to define it, except to say that he individually favored compensation for slave owners, and that he would execute the confiscation and other penal acts with the utmost liberality. He made it plain throughout that he was fighting for an idea, and that it was useless to talk of compromise until that idea was triumphant. We are aware, of course, of the long-exploded myth telling how he offered Stephens a sheet of paper with 'Union' written on it, and told the Confederate statesman to fill up the rest of the paper to suit himself. 'He offered us nothing but unconditional submission,' said Stephens on his return, and he called the conference, therefore, 'fruitless and inadequate.'"

The *Courier-Journal* (Dec. 23, 1916) takes this as a text, and miswrites again the "long-exploded myth" as veracious history, and upon it takes occasion to reflect upon Mr. Davis and to characterize Mr. Lincoln as "a kindly, just man."

How, in the name of all that is frank and fair, unbiased and unprejudiced can the accomplished Southern editor blame Mr. Davis for not taking advantage of information obtained through the Hampton Roads Conference, for the benefit of the people over whom he presided? The proposal to hold the Conference came to him from Washington; he appointed commissioners out of sympathy with his general administration, honest believers that something could be done by negotiating, and more likely to have the favourable ear of Mr. Lincoln than any other persons in the Confederate Government; left them unhampered by instructions, a free-hand to do the best they could. These gentlemen brought back the report that they could get no "terms" or "agreements." The conference was a dismal failure because Mr. Lincoln was implacable.

If the Confederate commissioners, all or any one of them, had private and "aside" information that

might have been used to the advantage of the Southern people, it was they who suppressed it, and voided all the possible results of the conference. No one can believe that Mr. Stephens or Mr. Hunter or Judge Campbell, all or any one of them, were so unpatriotic. This story about "Union, on your own terms," reflects most upon Mr. Stephens, for the allegation is that it was made known to him privately, and there is no evidence that he ever communicated it to his chief who sent him.

### The Summing-Up.

The quotations in this brief show that neither President Davis nor Vice President Stephens, nor any one of the Confederate commissioners, had any public, or *sub rosa*, information, obtained through the Hampton Roads Conference, which they failed to make use of to the benefit of the Southern people.

To continue to repeat this story about Union and then what you please, in view of the records presented in this monograph, is nothing short of a fabrication of history. It is based upon reports of the free conversational talks of Mr. Stephens about this meeting, and he was wont to complain, with great bitterness, about hearsay misrepresentations of him.

All the actors in that celebrated Conference are now dead and gone. They were every one gentlemen of the highest reputation and honor. They were all incapable of any unpatriotic or duplicitous action. Each of them, and some of them more than once, has put on record, in cold print, his account of what transpired at that Conference, and neither of them has intimated that there was some vital information that was not revealed, or, being known, was not used.

Mr. Lincoln told Congress what he knew about it. Mr. Seward set down in black and white what he knew about it. The three Confederate commissioners, Messrs. Stephens, Hunter and Campbell, made a formal statement of what they knew about it. These were all the members of the Conference, and all the persons who could have had first-hand information of what was said and done on Feb. 3, 1865, on board the *River Queen* at anchor in Hampton Roads. President Davis gave to the Confederate Congress his version of what occurred as it was given to him. Years after the war, Mr. Stephens wrote much in books and newspapers about what did occur according to his recollection. Mr. Hunter also set down his recollections, and Judge John A. Campbell also put to record his remembrances of it. Judge John H. Reagan and other gentlemen who were present in Richmond at the time, and publicly connected with administrative affairs, have also written their versions, gotten from general sources.

In all fairness, these ought to constitute the veracious history of the Hampton Roads Conference, and it is altogether historically illegitimate for any man to read into this record a report, founded upon the alleged free conversations of one man, who himself subsequently wrote much on the subject, but nothing which supports the alleged story; and which report needlessly reflects upon the honorable participators in that Conference.

JULIAN S. CARR,  
Durham, N. C.

January 15, 1917.





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